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Fern Cottage: A House of Creativity



NEW YORK ENGINEERING AND BUILDING RECORD - 1890

Architect's sketch of the house of William H. and Zulma D. Steele, just west of the intersection of River Street and Dorr Drive in Rutland.

About the Authors/Researchers

Kevin Morgan came to Rutland with his wife Christine and daughter Rachel in July 2000 to oversee the renovation of Fern Cottage. He began tirelessly to research the history of the building, the land and its inhabitants, with the assistance of Kathleen Hubbard. It is thanks to Kevin's love of Fern Cottage and his enthusiasm for putting pieces together that this *Quarterly* is possible.

Thanks is given to Jim Davidson of the Rutland Historical Society, Karen Sanborn of Castleton State College, and Robert G. Steele, grandson of Zulma De Lacy Steele. Robert is responsible for most of the family materials about the Steeles that are now available at the Rutland Historical Society. Robert, who lives in Monrovia, California, is the author of *A Yankee Pedigree* and *With Pen and Sword*.

Lisa Symonds and Avery Cleary have co-authored this *Quarterly*. Lisa is a marketing major at Castleton State College who completed an internship at Fern Cottage during the summer of 2001. She married Jay Symonds on 19 July 2001. While working on this *Quarterly*, she discovered that Zulma and William Steele, original owners of Fern Cottage, were married on 19 July 1871. Lisa lives in Rutland with her husband and son Travis.

Avery Cleary, Executive Director of Fern Hill, a resident of Vermont since 1996, moved to Rutland when the Becomings Foundation acquired Fern Hill. The Foundation's purpose is to offer experiences to deepen humanity's trust and awe of its place in the universe. Fern Hill is one of four projects of the Becomings Foundation. It offers programs that connect people more deeply with the earth, thus building stronger communities.



Fern Hill overlooks the historic Otter Creek just before it merges with the East Creek. The Dorr covered bridge has been replaced by a modern steel bridge.

Fern Cottage: A House of Creativity

by Avery Cleary and Lisa Symonds

When a visitor steps onto the grounds of Fern Hill, there is the feeling of entering another world. Guests say “there’s something special about this place.” The place helps the body relax, the mind to open and the heart to feel at peace. The special nature of Fern Hill is more a feeling than anything else. Some have called it an oasis in the heart of Rutland. Whether delving into its history or simply pausing to feel what is present today, it is apparent that Fern Cottage is truly a house of creativity.

The story of Fern Cottage begins years before it was built. The hillside overlooking the Otter Creek was once meadow and pastureland owned by Vermont poet Julia C. R. Dorr as part of “The Maples” estate. Julia was the daughter of W. Y. Ripley, a prominent businessman involved in Rutland’s early marble industry.

Mr. Ripley was active in the local community and beyond. He was a strong believer in education for women, a rather creative act for his generation. His generosity to Troy Conference Academy in Poultney led the Academy to change its name to Ripley Female College. The college is now Green Mountain College with a focus on environmental studies. Mr. Ripley also built the original Opera House on Merchants Row in 1868. It burned to the ground in 1875, the same year Mr. Ripley died, but was rebuilt in 1881.

Julia C. R. Dorr was an inspired poet, prolific commentator on nature, and a community activist. Julia married Seneca M. Dorr on 22 February 1847 in Rutland. He was a graduate of the Troy Conference Academy. The family lived in Ghent, New York, for 10 years. In 1859 W. Y. Ripley sold Julia, his daughter, and her husband the land that Fern Cottage sits on. Reestablishing roots in Rutland, they built “The Maples” on Dorr Drive in 1859 and raised their four children, Russell Ripley Dorr, Zulma De Lacy Dorr, William Ripley Dorr and Harry Ripley Dorr.

Seneca Dorr was a lawyer and gentleman farmer who served Rutland as a state legislator and later became a judge. Dorr Drive is named after him.

Julia’s love of nature and devotion to community gained her literary notice and respect in Rutland and beyond. Her correspondence reveals friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell

Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, William Dean Howells and Vermont writer Rowland E. Robinson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes who visited at the Dorr home were among the visionaries known as the Transcendentalists. They understood that a connection to nature was key to the development of the human spirit. This love of nature lives in the land and can be felt on the grounds of Fern Hill.

Zulma, Julia's only daughter, also had a special relationship with these visionaries. She wrote that Longfellow was like a father to her. Julia and her daughter shared a very special relationship. Both women had a deep love of nature and a passion for the arts. Zulma attended Ripley Female College from age 14 to 17. During the winter of 1869-1870 she studied drawing in New York at the Art School of Cooper Institute. Zulma and her mother often took trips to view art collections. Their favorite excursion was to frequent the art galleries in New York.

In 1868 Zulma's brother Russell introduced Zulma De Lacy Dorr to William Henry Steele when William made a visit to "The Maples" from Union College at Russell's request. William and Zulma strengthened their relationship over the next three years through frequent letters and visits during their school years. The two were married on 19 July 1871 at "The Maples". After a honeymoon in Massachusetts, the Steeles moved to Michigan where they lived in a remote cabin named "Millcote" where it often snowed for days. Although William Henry



Zulma De Lacy Dorr (1870)

William Henry Steele (1870)

Steele became a successful businessman, dealing at various times in surveying, lumber, steel and copper, his wife Zulma felt isolated and missed her home and family in Rutland.

Zulma's diary reveals the hardships she endured from living in a remote place at a great distance from her family. One particularly severe winter kept Zulma housebound, an experience that she describes as nearly unbearable. The following diary entry reveals her delight and comfort from her mother Julia's visit.

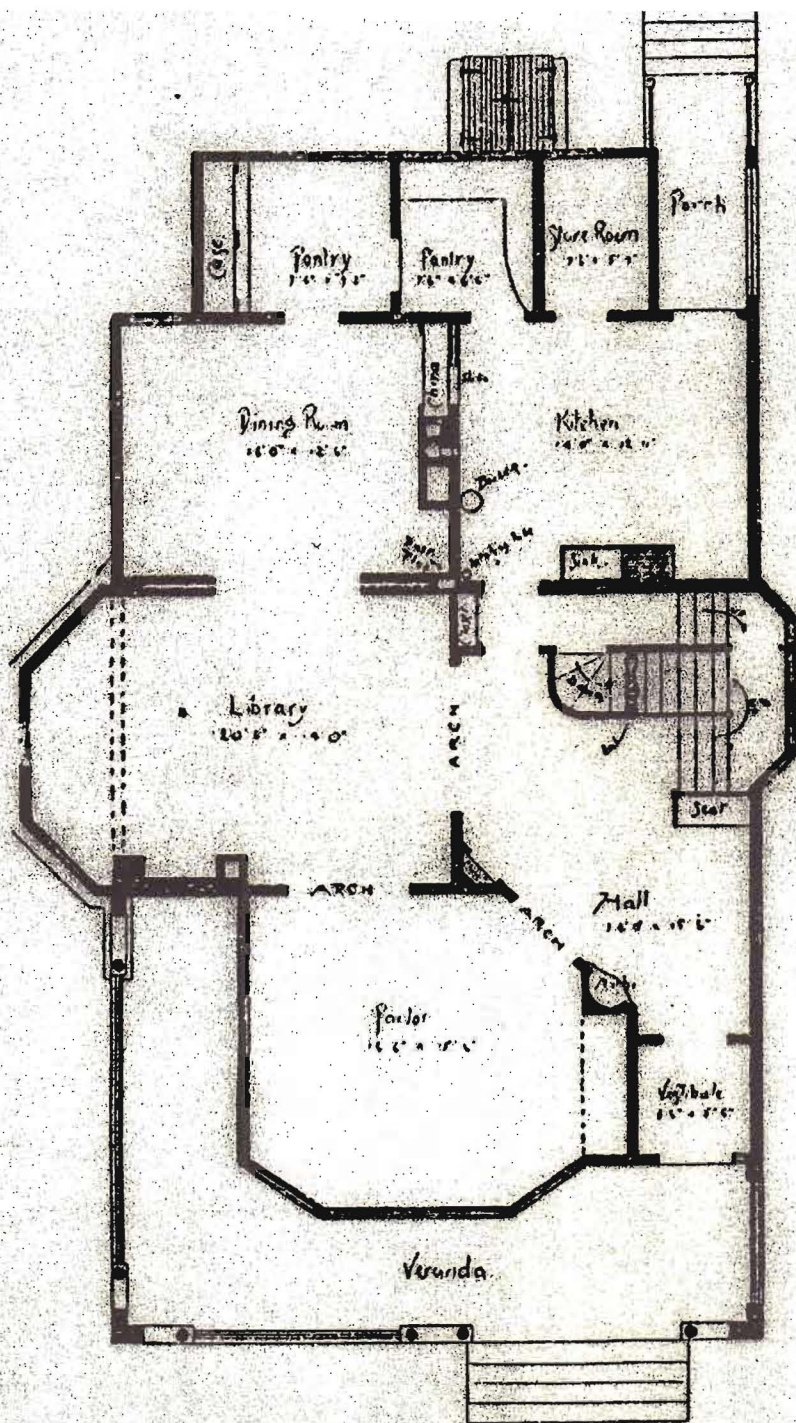
"The last of February my dear mother came to see us cheering by advice and assistance and giving me that help and comfort only a loving, tender and sympathetic mother can. And here I want to say that my mother has from my very babyhood, been my nearest and dearest friend. In girlhood my confidential friend, and now that I am a wife and mother, my counselor and loving helper, although we are separated by many miles, teaching me by her example what a wife and mother should be, and continually inspiring me to strive to reach the high standard which I have always had before me."

Zulma must have been relieved and delighted in 1889 when she and William moved with their three children Frederic Dorr Steele (b. 1873), Joseph Dorr Steele (b. 1879) and Zulma Ripley Steele (b. 1881) back to Rutland. Once again united, Julia and Zulma were able to enjoy the fellowship of the extended family and to renew their artistic partnership.

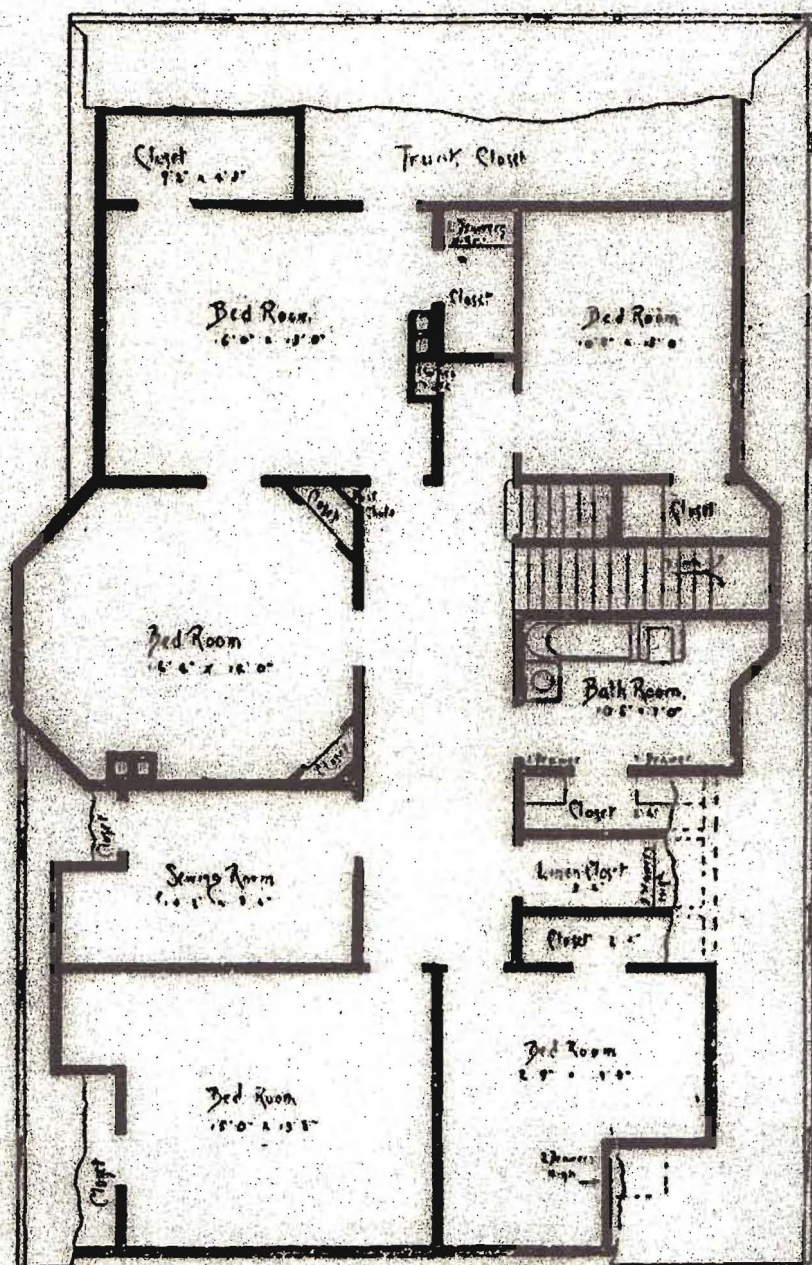
Zulma and her husband, William, retained the famed American architect Ernest G. W. Dietrich to design their new home in Rutland. Dietrich, who was born in Pittsburgh in 1857, was considered to be an important innovator in domestic design. A graduate of Duff's College in Pittsburgh, he also attended the Western College of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh). In 1882 he and Charles M. Barthberger organized the firm of Barthberger and Dietrich. After several years Dietrich withdrew from the firm and opened an office in New York City in 1889. His early work was largely residential but in later practice he was commissioned to plan both public and commercial buildings.

His place in the development of the Dutch Colonial Revival style, as well as his role in creating the Craftsman House with Gustav Stickley, firmly established his place in the vanguard of the late 19th and early 20th Century styles. From Queen Anne seaside cottages to a Bavarian Gothic school, his drawings illustrate the inventive imagination of an architect and his era.

It seems obvious that the design of Fern Cottage would be innovative and creative. The local newspaper described the house as a model of architecture. Its 3,600 square feet of floor space attracted



First floor plan of Fern Cottage.



Second floor plan of Fern Cottage.

attention for its unique design. A series of newspaper clippings documented the progress of the construction of the building that began in the spring of 1889.

"Will build on hill. Sightly location selected for the new dwelling of Mr. W. H. Steele; Messrs. Houston and Sleeper have taken the contract to build the new house of Mr. W. H. Steele on the hill near the Dorr Bridge. The building will be 32 by 40 feet in size and the architecture has a bearing on the old English style. The plans call for a foundation of rock-faced dark blue marble and the whole design is for a neat and artistic house. There will be hot and cold water throughout the house and on the second floor there will be five sleeping rooms, while the attic will be fitted up for a studio. The cost of the structure is estimated to be \$6,000 to \$7,000. The house will stand on the hill directly overlooking the bridge which is a very sightly location. The foundation is already underway and the carpenters will begin shortly."

"W. H. Steele's new residence on the elevation just west of Dorr's Bridge is nearly completed, and the dwelling is as conveniently arranged as its style of architecture is novel."

"It was our pleasure yesterday afternoon to be driven to the elegant new residence of W. H. Steele on the hill just west of Dorr's Bridge. The house, which is a model of the Queen Anne style, is located on a very commanding site and is surrounded by romantic scenery, such as undisturbed wildwood and the rough ground that goes with it, affords. Finely arranged driveways, leading up to the residence, have been built. What is called a natural cow path leads from the house to the road. The hill slope leading down to the street has been neatly graded and sown to grass seed. At the foot of the hill, extending along the road the width of his lot (50 rods), a broad eight-foot high stone wall has been built. In fact, there is no residence in town so romantically located. The naturalness of its surroundings makes it one of the pleasantest places in this section. The work of grading and building the driveways and paths was done by C. D. Barnard, who has the reputation of knowing how to do such work. Master Carpenters Houston and Sleeper built the residence."

The attention and praise visited on Fern Cottage reached well beyond the local area. The *Rutland Herald* noted that "William H. Steele's house, built near 'The Maples' in this town last summer, is illustrated in the current number of the *New York Engineering and Building Record*." This journal each week gave two illustrations intended to show what was best and most interesting in American and foreign architecture. "This selection gives Mr. Steele's house such a compliment as very few buildings in the state have had." Fern Cottage is now listed in *The Historic Architecture of Rutland County*.

Some of the unique features include a gambrel roof, stained glass oriole window, a distinctive dormer and a marble cellar. The second floor has four units of built-in drawers and a trunk closet for the steamer trunks and luggage that were often used by the well-traveled family.

Fern Cottage was located next to "The Maples" where Zulma's mother Julia lived. It was on the grounds of Fern Hill that Zulma had played as a child. It was no surprise that in 1892 mother Julia penned *Fallow Field*, a book of verse that was copiously illustrated by daughter Zulma's charcoal drawings. This work beautifully described the fields of home and the changes in the environment that had taken place. It was a shining example of an artistic partnership that only Zulma and Julia could share.

Animals played an important part in the lives of the Dorr and Steele Families. "Ike", the family dog, was another beloved member of the Steele family. The following ad was posted in the newspaper on 22 May 1891: "Lost - Pug Dog named "Ike." \$1 reward will be paid for his return to my house, near Dorr's bridge. Wm. H. Steele." Happily Ike was found and returned to sit on the porch at Fern Cottage.



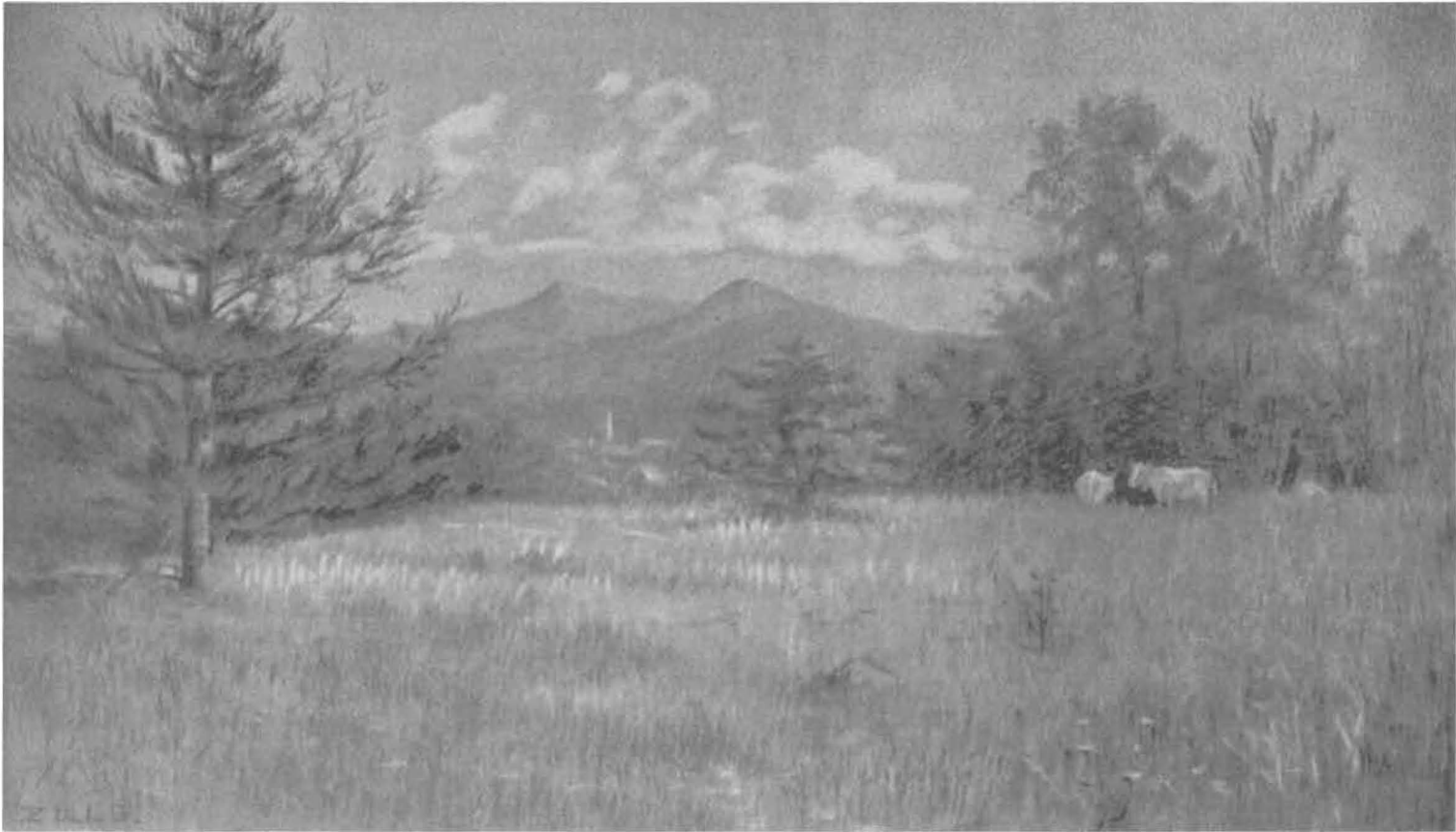
"Ike" - 1891

The porch at Fern Cottage.

In 1894 Zulma and mother Julia again joined to publish *Periwinkle*, the story of the family cow and her wanderings around "The Maples" and on Fern Hill. Zulma's dedication was to her brothers "whose boyish feet knew all the devious ways of Periwinkle".



"The sun comes up and the sun goes down; the night mist shroudeth the sleeping town."



"Tinkle, tinkle, Periwinkle! Soft and clear, far or near, still the meadow notes I hear!"

The creative legacy of Fern Hill continued on in at least two of Zulma's children. Frederic Steele, the oldest child, excelled in drawing. At the age of 16 he moved to "The Maples" to live with his grandmother and attend Rutland High School. His love and talent for drawing led him to New York City where his first job in 1889 was at an architect's office. At night he studied life drawing. Frederic's devotion to his studies earned him a bronze medal from the St. Louis Exposition in 1893. *Life Magazine* bought his first drawings. This was a stepping-stone to his next job at *Harper's Magazine*. Today Frederic Steele is most recognized for his illustrations in Arthur Conan Doyle's series *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

A YANKEE PEDIGREE - STEELE



Frederic Dorr Steele (1924)

THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES - DOYLE



Sherlock Holmes drawn by Steele.

Zulma's youngest child, also named Zulma, was like her mother, an artist. Her interests were centered in the artist colony in Woodstock, New York. Impressionist oil paintings were her hallmark.

Gardening was another creative avenue at Fern Hill. Zulma De Lacy Steele shared her mother Julia's love of beautiful gardens. According to her grandson, Robert G. Steele, "She loved gardening, and her home was never without flowers, indoors and out. Her garden she had arranged in geometrical pattern, with walks between the flower beds." The beautiful gardens continued when Fern Cottage was sold to Samuel Howard Sr. in 1899. During the years the Howard/Stratton family owned the property, it was a showcase, complete with tennis courts, swimming pool and perennial gardens.



The grounds at Fern Hill.

The house stayed in the Howard/Stratton family for 74 years until it was sold for one dollar to the church next door that had occupied the home formerly known as “The Maples”. During the 1970s Fern Cottage was sold by the church and converted into apartments. In recent years it had fallen into disrepair and was in foreclosure when it was purchased by the Becomings Foundation on 22 May 2000.

Fern Cottage is being restored with the help of The Preservation Trust of Vermont, The Freeman Foundation, The Vermont Community Loan Fund, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the generous support of many individuals.

The ancestors of Fern Hill had a deep, abiding commitment to community. Fern Hill carries on that tradition through creative programming and community partnerships that grow from the seeds of love planted over 100 years ago.



Fern Cottage from the south in the 1890s.



Fern Cottage from the east in the 1890s.

Fern Hill Today

Once again Fern Hill stands proud, welcoming, inviting all to explore its grounds and experience its presence. If one is very still and listens with the heart, the house and those who have graced its floors, reach through time, issuing an invitation to carry on the tradition of creativity. Fern Cottage is available for meetings and retreats. Classes, community events and meditation groups are offered seasonally.

The Connecting Kids to Life program offers a unique blend of art, literature, history and nature adventures. Children have the opportunity to explore the wonders of the natural world, experience the restorative effects of nature and give back to the larger community of life in an age appropriate way. Art, literature and history come alive as they are explored in relation to the natural world. Cultural activities that help connect kids to the natural world play a major role in drug and crime prevention for youth. Youth are at a higher risk to engage in crime and/or substance abuse when they feel a lack of belonging. Connecting Kids to Life helps children feel a sense of belonging by fostering their connection to the earth and the larger community of life. As children participate in activities that deepen their sense of belonging, they come to realize that support from the natural world is always available. This helps to develop self-sufficiency and independence. As children learn skills to access this support they are in a better position to guide themselves through the challenges they face day to day. This program equips them with a powerful, ever-present means of support and inspiration. The Connecting Kids to Life program is a natural outgrowth of the love of nature held in the hearts of the original owners of Fern Hill.

Although there is a myriad of activity at Fern Hill, there is a potential for much more. The creative energy of the institution can support numerous activities. A new century offers great opportunities for the continuance of the heritage of Fern Hill and Fern Cottage. This may include a haven for nature writers, a sculpture garden, studio space for artists and whatever the creative spirit may aspire to do. The house fosters creativity; we have only to listen and let the next steps reveal themselves.

Please call 773-0003 for schedules of activities and information about the use of the facilities.

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Entryway to memories.



Fireplace of warmth.



Window of wonder.